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SUBJECT: THAI GOVERNMENT REACTS QUICKLY TO CRITICISM OF
ROHINGYAS "BOAT PEOPLE" TREATMENT, PROMISES INVESTIGATION

REF: BANGKOK 124

11. (SBU) In a January 19th meeting with local human rights activities, Royal Thai government (RTG) Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva responded to international press criticism of treatment of Rohingyas "boat people" entering Thai territory. Recent press reports by the South China Morning Post and BBC have accused Thai military units of assembling any encountered Muslim Rohingyas on an island off the coast near Ranong, and forcing them to board unpowered vessels which are then towed out to sea with insufficient food and water. PM Abhisit pledged an investigation to determine if any human rights violations had been committed by the local Royal Thai army southern command, which is embroiled in an anti-insurgency effort against Malay Muslim separatists in the deep south.

12. (SBU) According to a NGO participant in the meeting, the Prime Minister noted that Thailand would uphold its obligations under the UN Convention Against Torture. (Note: Thailand is not a party to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees or any of its protocols.) RTG Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya, traveling to restive Pattani Province near the Thai-Malay border, told reporters on January 19th that the accusations were being taken "very seriously." Post MFA contacts confirmed press reports that preparations are being made for FM Kasit to meet later this week with Bangkok-based diplomatic missions from Burma, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and India, to explain Thai policy towards the sea-bound Rohingyas and discuss the problem; before becoming Foreign Minister in late December, Kasit had identified migration as a transnational issue on which Thailand needed to engage its neighbors more intensively. Some of the "boat people", who cross from Burma's Northern Rakhine state into Bangladesh to board vessels bound for Malaysia, have instead ended up in the Andaman Islands (India) and Aceh Province, Indonesia in the past month. According to NGO reports, several hundred are missing from at least one vessel encountered by the Indian coast guard off Port Blair in the Andaman Islands.

13. (SBU) Public assurances from the Thai military have been quick as well, rebutting accusations of mistreatment. On January 19th, Army Commander General Anupong Paochinda released a public statement that: "Rohingya refugees have not been tortured by Thai soldiers as was reported by foreign media." According to the statement, "military officials have been firmly instructed to treat the refugees based on the given legal procedures." The specific accusations that Thai military units towed Rohingyas' unpowered vessels out to sea with insufficient food and water were not addressed in the

statement, however. In a January 17th telephone conversation with RefCoord, local army commander Colonel Manat Khongpan acknowledged that Thai army units visit beached boats carrying Rohingyas, provide food and water, and instruct them to depart from Thai territory. However, Colonel Manat flatly denied that the Thai military towed vessels out to sea, or that any deaths had occurred as a result of the "push back" policy. Manat agreed to provide a briefing on the details of the Thai policy towards Rohingyas boat people in the southern port city of Ranong on January 22nd.

14. (SBU) Comments.

The rapid, high-level response by the new Democrat Party-led government to the Rohingyas "boat people" issue - coming quickly on the heels of Amnesty International's report critical of RTG policy in the south (Reftel) - is a welcome change from the often flat-footed reactions and denials from recent administrations. PM Abhisit, FM Kasit and top army leader Anupong all have said the right things initially, promising an evaluation of the push-back policy and adherence to basic human rights standards. Verifiable detail on actual implementation of Thai policy towards the vulnerable sea-farers and to what happened in recent weeks in the Andaman is scarce, however. Post hopes to have a clearer idea of what is happening on Thai territory and its territorial waters in the Andaman Sea after the briefing by the local commander on January 22nd. Post will report any further information immediately.

JOHN